Approved For Release 2007/10/19 : CIA-RDP84B00049R000902300018-4

STATEMENT BY
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ASSISTANT SECRETARY OF STATE FOR INTER-AMERICAN AFFAIRS
BEFORE THE
SUBCOMMITTEE ON FOREIGN OPERATIONS
OF THE
HOUSE APPROPRIATIONS COMMITTEE
February 1, 1982

The President is expected shortly to sign a determination under Section 506(A) of the Foreign Assistance Act of 1961, as amended, allocating up to $55 million in emergency security assistance to El Salvador. This assistance will be in the form of U.S. military materiel, services and training.

Why was this action taken?

First, because there is an unforeseen emergency requiring immediate security assistance.

After the failure of their much-heralded "final offensive" in January 1981, insurgent cadres appear to have rethought their strategy, concluding that the FMLN/FDR did not have the broad popular support necessary to achieve victory by frontal attack on the government and armed forces. They abandoned the strategy of building popular support and instead turned to attacking the economy in a "guerra prolongada" or war of attrition. The new strategy calls for hit-and-run attacks against small military units and lightly-defended economic targets, such as bridges, electrical transmission lines, and dams. The intention is to damage severely an economy that was already in crisis and to undermine the morale of the government and popular confidence in it. Since then, attacks on El Salvador's economic infrastructure have caused almost $50 million damage to electrical and communications sytems, bridges and rail lines, bringing increased hardship to the Salvadoran people.

We watched this tactic develop, concluding by year-end that it was endangering not the Salvadoran armed forces, but people's livelihood. An economic emergency was resulting.

Meanwhile Nicaragua was being transformed into an ever more efficient platform for supporting insurgency in El Salvador. We have watched as the FMLN headquarters

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unit was developed on Nicaraguan soil, clandestine logistics routes perfected, guerrilla training camps set up. The number of Cuban military and security advisors in Nicaragua doubled during 1981 to between 1800 and 2000. Munitions and weapons resupply to the insurgents in El Salvador is again approaching levels reached before the "final offensive." Nicaragua also brought in modern tanks and is preparing for the introduction of supersonic aircraft, thus acquiring an offensive capability. Nicaragua has become a two-fold threat to its neighbors: as the support-system for insurrection, and because of the development of its offensive capacity.

Another factor is the FMLN/FDR's use of force and intimidation to disrupt the election campaign that began last week and will conclude March 28 with voting for a Constituent Assembly. This will be El Salvador's first step toward the establishment of a fully legitimate government -- one elected by the people. After nearly 50 years of military rule, this is a bold but vulnerable move. The guerrilla FMLN is determined to sabotage and block the establishment of an elected government.

Finally, we faced an emergency of an even more urgent character. In the early morning of January 27, a guerrilla attack on the Ilopango Air Base outside San Salvador severely damaged a large part of the Salvadoran Air Force -- including a number of the Huey helicopters we provided to El Salvador early last year at the direction of Presidents Carter and Reagan. The Hueys are El Salvador's only transport helicopters, and they are critically important to the mobility and rapid response capability of the Salvadoran Army -- even more so in the wake of bridge and rail sabotage. The guerrilla success on January 27 will undoubtedly be followed by additional high-visibility raids on key military and civilian targets. Unless the helicopters are replaced quickly, the Salvadoran armed forces will be unable to respond effectively.

The magnitude of the military and economic challenge from the guerrillas could not be foreseen at the time the Administration's revised FY 82 security assistance request was submitted to the Congress in early 1981. As a result, we have had to commit all of the $25 million in Foreign Military Sales credits and MAP grants made available by the Congress in the 1982 appropriation. Most of this assistance, $15 million, is financing the training in the United States of some 500 Salvadoran officer candidates and the 1,000 members of a second quick reaction battalion. Additional junior officers

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are essential to a modest expansion of the army; enlisted volunteers are plentiful, trained officers are not. Over the longer term, this training will improve Salvadoran military capability and command and control. It was not designed to meet, and will not meet, the short-term threat so graphically illustrated by the Ilopango attack. But having fully committed available funds, we have no means of replacing the equipment lost in that attack or of supplying the weapons and ground vehicles and communications gear urgently needed now to meet the mounting guerrilla effort to sabotage the elections. To withhold 506(A) assistance at this point would be to abandon El Salvador.

Second, because the decisive battle for Central America is underway in El Salvador.

Cuba is systematically expanding its capacity to project military power beyond its own shores. The arrival this year of a second squadron of MiG-23/Floggers and the 63,000 tons of war supplies imported from the Soviet Union in 1981 have added substantially to an air, land and sea arsenal that was already the area's most powerful.

Nicaragua is being exploited as a base for the export of subversion and armed intervention throughout Central America.

If, after Nicaragua, El Salvador is captured by a violent minority, who in Central America would not live in fear? How long would it be before major strategic U.S. interests -- the canal, sea lanes, oil supplies -- were at risk?

For most of its life as a nation, our country has faced no threat from its neighbors. But, unless we act decisively now, the future could well bring more Cubas: totalitarian regimes so linked to the Soviet Union that they become factors in the military balance, and so incompetent economically that their citizens' only hope becomes that of one day migrating to the United States.

Third, because if we do not sustain the struggle now, we shall fall back into that terrible vicious circle, in which in Central America the only alternative to right-wing dictatorship is left-wing dictatorship.

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General Romero's traditionalist military government was overturned two years ago by a military-civilian coalition committed to reform -- land reform and the transformation of El Salvador into a democracy. We supported the reforms then, we support them now. And real progress has been made -- for all the civil strife, even though there is a long way to go, above all in bringing violence under control.

Let me say a word more about violence before closing. Violence has always been high in El Salvador, but it became epidemic after the extreme left obtained outside support for armed warfare. The issue of violence and counterviolence has been and is at the center of our dealings with the Salvadoran government. Some of it has been brought under control. Charges against the murderers of our countrywomen are about to be brought -- at last our best estimates show a steady decline in non-combatant deaths over the past year, a thousand officers and men from the security forces have been transferred, punished, or retired, the extremist organization ORDEN abolished.

But it is not necessary to believe every alleged massacre story -- in particular reports by the insurgent radio station of the killing of more than 900 people people in Morazan appear highly exaggerated -- to know that massive problems remain. This morning's report of the killing of 17 alleged guerrillas in San Salvador is a case in point. We do not know whether this was a guerrilla organization or not, whether arms were seized or not, but we are not ready to buy the notion that a firefight occurred and deeply deplore the excessive violence used against those involved. And of course, violence by the guerrillas -- who boast of of the casualties they inflict -- goes on.

Our intention is to keep up the pressure, to get the problem of violence under as much control as it can be in circumstances of civil strife, in order to promote the full scope of our interests in the region, interests we believe are widely shared in this country:

-- Defense of our national security interests against the Soviet/Cuban challenge;

-- Promotion of democratic, open societies in our immediate neighborhood.

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